

UTILITY PATENT APPLICATION

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TITLE OF INVENTION

TRAILER COUPLER ASSEMBLY

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims priority from U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/418,695 filed on October 16, 2002 and entitled Trailer Coupler Assembly, which is hereby incorporated by reference herein.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Trailered objects are typically stored on the trailers that carry them. For example, a boat can generally be stored within a typical garage while on the trailer used to tow the boat. A typical boat, which is 18 feet in length, supported by a typical trailer requires storage space of approximately 24 feet measured from the most rearward point of the boat's stern to the most forward element of the trailer, that being the trailer coupler. The average inside length of a garage is approximately 24 feet or less, which creates a condition where the boat and trailer combination will not quite fit in the garage. Forcing the boat and trailer combination to fit into such garages can cause damage to the garage, the trailer, and the boat.

[0003] The prior art discloses a solution to such a tight-fitting storage condition where a pre-determined portion of the trailer tongue or coupler is allowed to pivot or fold back upon itself to reduce the overall length of the trailer. Therefore, the trailer-boat combination may better fit into a garage of standard length. Such pivoting trailer coupler designs are well known and can be seen in the market place today. Several examples of these designs are shown in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,398,742; 5,503,423; 5,890,617; and 6,364,337 which are enclosed and herewith incorporated by reference herein.

[0004] The prior art pivoting trailer coupler designs indicated above illustrate the complexity of design which is the current state of the art. Particularly, the prior art predominately uses a “sandwich” design having overlapping plates and tubes that extend vertically over the trailer beam. However, as described, the manufacture and installation of such designs must be handled by skilled and experienced laborers to ensure proper orientation of the numerous components and to ensure proper pivot and engagement.

[0005] The present invention provides significant benefits to the trailer manufacturer. The prior art designs require great skill and precision to weld several loose components to a structure that is not straight, does not have parallel surfaces, and is generally not an accurately defined foundation. Further, the prior art components conduct a large amount of heat generated from the welding process that can relieve internal stresses causing the finished weldment to deviate from its planned locations. This can cause a misalignment and binding of components.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved trailer coupler assembly that is easier to manufacture.

[0007] It is a further object of the present invention to provide a trailer coupler assembly having a pivot assembly that is simpler and more cost effective to manufacture and install.

[0008] The objects of the present invention are satisfied by providing a trailer coupler pivot assembly comprising a pivot mount member connected to a trailer frame member and a hinge bracket connected to a trailer tongue arm. The hinge bracket is pivotally connected to the pivot mount member so that the trailer tongue arm is pivotal relative to the trailer frame member between an open position and a closed position. However, either of the pivot mount member or the hinge bracket comprises a single, prefabricated component to make assembly more efficient and cost effective. With both the pivot mount member and the hinge bracket being single, prefabricate components, the trailer coupler pivot assembly can be more easily installed with fewer components and welds and by less skilled labor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

[0009] Objects and advantages together with the operation of the invention may be better understood by reference to the detailed description taken in connection with the following illustrations, wherein:

- [0010] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of the trailer coupler assembly of the present invention where the surge brake actuator coupler is pivoted to an open position;
- [0011] FIG. 2 is a top view of the trailer coupler assembly shown in FIG. 1;
- [0012] FIG. 3 is a perspective view of the trailer coupler assembly where the surge brake actuator coupler is held in a closed position;
- [0013] FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a bottom coupler slide plate having the wiring harness secured thereto;
- [0014] FIG. 5 is a perspective view of the pivot mount;
- [0015] FIG. 6 is a perspective view of the hinge bracket;
- [0016] FIG. 7 is a perspective view of the chain retainer before being mounted to the coupler.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0017] It should be noted that while the present invention is described for use with a surge brake actuator coupler, the present invention may be used with any type trailer coupler and is not limited by the description herein.

[0018] The present invention provides for a trailer coupler pivot assembly comprising a pivot mount member connected to the trailer and a hinge bracket connected to the coupler wherein the hinge bracket is pivotally connected to the pivot mount member so that the coupler can be pivoted away from the trailer to decrease the overall length of the trailer.

[0019] With reference now to the drawings, FIG. 1 shows a trailer coupler pivot assembly 10 comprising a hinge bracket 12 pivotally connected to a pivot mount member 14 by pivot pin 16 so as to define pivotal axis zz. For ease of manufacture and construction, both the hinge bracket 12 and the pivot mount member 14 are preferably single members connected to the coupler and trailer respectively. Preferably, both the hinge bracket 12 and the pivot mount member 14 are made from cast metal, such as steel, metal powder, or other suitable material. And while it is preferred that axis zz be vertical or substantially vertical so that the coupler swings open through a horizontal plane, other axis angles may be utilized and still perform the desired operation.

[0020] As best shown in FIG. 6, hinge bracket 12 comprises a single metal cast member having a pair of confronting welding flanges 21 capable of being welded to coupler 18. Hinge bracket 12 further includes two pairs of mutually opposed bores having a pivot mount receiving portion 22 located therebetween. Hinge bracket 12 includes bores 24 that partially define axis zz and bores 26 designed to receive removable locking hinge pin 29 as further described below. Pivot mount receiving portion 22 is configured so that pivot mount member 14 may be pivotally connected to hinge bracket 12 and be pivotally received within hinge bracket 12 when the pivot assembly is in a closed position as shown in FIG. 3.

[0021] As best shown in FIG. 5, pivot mount member 14 comprises a single metal cast member having a pair of confronting welding flanges 28 capable of being welded to trailer beam 20. Pivot mount member 14 further includes an aperture 30 therethrough so

as to provide access to the interior of trailer beam 20, where wiring or other components are stored, when pivot mount member 14 is connected to trailer beam 20. Pivot mount member 14 further includes bore 32 for pivotally connecting pivot mount member 14 to hinge bracket 12 and partially defining axis zz and bore 34 capable of receiving hinge pin 29. Pivot mount member 14 is configured to be pivotally received with the pivot mount-receiving portion 22 of hinge bracket 12 when the pivot assembly is in a closed position as shown in FIG. 3.

[0022] The pivot mount member 14 and the hinge bracket 12 have relatively little running clearance between the bores and pivot pin 16. This minimizes the potential for rust bonding of the two components. To prevent this situation from happening, a grease zerk 36 is formed in the center of the pivot mount member 14 on both sides such that the end user can apply grease to the components during storage times, yet while towing or parking, the grease zerks are hidden inside the pivot assembly. The grease zerks are installed on both sides so that the end user can determine which way they want the tongue of the trailer to pivot by interchanging the positions of the pivot fastener and the lock pin.

[0023] In construction, pivot mount member 14 is connected to the trailer frame (not shown) by any suitable means. Preferably, pivot mount member 14 is welded to trailer beam 20. However, other connection means may be utilized to connect pivot mount member 14 to the trailer frame. Likewise, hinge bracket 12 is connected to coupler 18 by any suitable means. Preferably, hinge bracket 12 is welded to the coupler 18 (herein the

brake actuator coupler cover). However, other connection means may be utilized to connect the hinge bracket 12 to the coupler 18.

[0024] Pivot mount member 14 is pivotally connected to hinge bracket 12 by pivot pin 16 which can be a typical threaded bolt. Therefore, the coupler 18 can pivot about axis zz from an open position shown in FIG. 1 to a closed position shown in FIG. 3. When in a closed position, hinge bracket 12 is pivoted about axis zz and receives pivot mount member 14 within pivot mount receiving portion 22. When pivot mount member 14 is fully nested within pivot mount receiving portion 22, bores 26 and bore 34 align so that removable hinge pin 29 can be inserted therethrough to maintain the connection and prevent further axial movement. Removable hinge pin 29 may also include a self-locking member so that the hinge pin 29 cannot be accidentally removed from the bores 26 and bore 34. In order to pivot the coupler 18 about axis zz, hinge pin 29 can be removed from hinge bracket bores 26 and pivot mount member bore 34, thereby permitting the coupler to swing about axis zz to the side of trailer beam 20.

[0025] As best shown in FIG. 2, there is a planned interference between the pivot mount member 14 and the hinge bracket 12 when the coupler assembly is pivoted to the open position. A pre-determined minimum clearance is established between the couple 18 (or herein the actuator cover) and the trailer beam 20. The planned interference, or pivot stop 38, prevents the accidental breakage of equipment such as clearance lights that may be mounted to the sides of the trailer beam 20.

[0026] The prior art shows coupler pivot assemblies where a plate and tube sandwich construction where an upper and lower plate is welded to a trailer beam and two vertical sleeves are welded to the sides of the actuator housing. Based on the relative flatness of the two plates, required alignment of both plates to each other and the orientation of the two vertical sleeves in three axes all in relationship to one another, the sandwich design becomes a difficult fabrication process to control.

[0027] The present invention does not have these inherent fabrication difficulties. Each bore of the pivot mount and hinge bracket is established in three axes and relative to themselves through the casting and boring process. This eliminates the need for precision alignment of upper and lower plates and vertical sleeves. To further ease the fabrication process, the hinge bracket and pivot mounts have shapes cast into them that provide self-locating datums to the trailer beam and actuator cover. It is also obvious that this design can allow for differing trailer beam shapes through minor changes to the pivot mount and hinge bracket castings. This allows the trailer manufacturer to crudely place the pivot mount on the trailer beam and weld without the necessary precision as required with prior art.

[0028] Safety chains are also an important safety feature for any trailer. With pivoting tongue trailers, manufacturers typically opt to anchor the safety chains to the trailer beam rather than the pivoting portion of the tongue. As a result, these safety chains can be rather long and may sag to the point that they may drag on the pavement during towing.

To alleviate this condition, the present invention also provides for a chain retainer 40 attached to the pivoting coupler 18.

[0029] As best shown in FIG. 7, chain retainer 40 is a U-shaped member connected to the coupler 18 (herein the brake actuator coupler cover) and extending below thereof. The chain retainer 40 has a horizontal member of sufficient length to prevent the links of the safety chain (not shown) from catching on the edges of the chain retainer. The overall inside height of the chain retainer 40 is set to allow for the possibility of the chains doubling up and thereby permitting the safety chains to slide freely on the chain retainer which is expected during normal towing events such as cornering.

[0030] Trailer manufacturers also typically exit the wiring harness, which routes the electrical signals from the towing vehicle to the trailer, out of the trailer beam prior to the pivot mechanism. This is done largely because most couplers or brake actuator couplers on the market do not have enough room inside them to route the harness therethrough. Therefore, this results in very long wiring harnesses that can drag on the pavement during towing or be in the way during storage.

[0031] The present invention addresses these problems by routing the wiring harness 42 through the interior of the coupler 18. As best shown in FIG. 1, the wiring harness 42 extends through the coupler body and exits out the front and rear of the coupler body. With the wiring harness 42 routed through the coupler body, it is now protected from unwanted road abrasion due to dragging and accidental damage during storage. The

wiring harness 42 can be attached to the existing wiring harness (not shown) provided by the trailer manufacturer which exists the trailer beam.

[0032] It is presently preferred that the wiring harness 42, as best shown in FIG. 4, is attached to the lower slide plate 44 of the surge brake actuator coupler by a series of routing hooks 46 molded to the lower slide plate 44. The wiring harness 42 is secured to the lower slide plate 44 to limit the position of the wiring harness 42 relative to the internal components of the surge brake actuator coupler and provide strain relief. However, it is also contemplated that the wiring harness can be secured to the interior of a traditional coupler.

[0033] The invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiment. Obviously, modifications and alternations will occur to others upon a reading and understanding of this specification. The claims as follows are intended to include all modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the claims or the equivalent thereof.